

## Jim and Sally Shanks

M&T Staten Ranch, San Joaquin County

DAVID HUGHES/NOODLES & LIME



*Jim and Sally Shanks enjoy the evening view of birds flocking to their flooded fields.*

### Winter Flooding Wheat and Corn

"Isn't that a sight?" said Jim Shanks, pointing to at least 500 sandhill cranes feeding on flooded corn stubble. He was talking to a mixed audience of farmers and agency folks on tour at M&T's Staten Ranch following a workshop the ranch hosted on wildlife-friendly farming practices. Ranch manager Jim Shanks and his wife, Sally, have each developed reputations as aggressive farmers and conservationists.

"I have been flooding about 6,000 acres of corn and wheat stubble for 20-plus years. Every year we make little modifications and we see more birds," says Jim. "Last winter we counted 18,000 greater and lesser sandhill cranes on Staten Island alone. I can't name all the different shorebird and duck species we get here."

"Sally loves these darn birds

so much she helped band them up in Alaska, where they breed. During 1992 she counted 50 of those collared birds right here on Staten Island, and spotted one marked swan right from our front porch. But even I'm convinced that the flooding is as good for our farmland as it is for the birds."

Since they started their fall flooding program, the Shanks drown their weeds instead of spraying them. "The water breaks down the crop stubble, eliminating a tillage cost. It pushes the salts down to expose a productive root zone for the next crop," says Jim. "When the fields are drained, the soil moisture is consistent and the ground is ready to work for our first crop." Jim adds that the birds also provide plenty of free fertilizer.

Sally warms up to the topic of their second crop—the birds.

"After harvest we sequentially flood, first the wheat, then the corn. The cranes are usually bouncing up and down the banks, waiting for us to get the water on by the second week of September," says Sally. "But we bring the water level up slowly, allowing the birds to follow the bug line and graze in water just inches deep. We always try to have new water coming on, at various depths, for different species. We pull it off, too, so the shorebirds have mudflats."

Since Staten Island farmlands lie below the river level, the only costs for fall flooding relate to pumping water off of the fields. Providing high quality winter habitat for waterfowl and shorebirds is clearly a beneficial use of the water. "And the benefits to soil and the farming operation are no longer questioned," adds Jim.

Heartened by their winter flooding successes, Jim and Sally turned their attentions to a serious farming problem. "The Mokelumne River borders Staten Island for 25 miles and we were frustrated that state and federal agencies couldn't seem to do anything about our deteriorating levees," said Sally. "We started working on a few demonstration projects and the more we cooperated with agency folks, the more we trusted each other and the more we got done."

Since then these two Delta farmers have stabilized one mile of shoreline berm, built two lagoons, and constructed three channel islands—one of which already harbors a significant night heron rookery.

In recognition of their dedicated work on behalf of wildlife, Jim and Sally received the Department of Fish and Game's Wildlife Conservation Award and the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture's Innovative Farmer Award.